

Preserve Civil War battlefields

Some of America's most hallowed ground is threatened by suburban sprawl.

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So we need to preserve Civil War battlefields — about 25 of them — that would be either purchased for preservation, protected by zoning or other means, or otherwise commemorated for their historic importance.

This is part of a national strategy called the "American Battlefield Protection Plan" announced recently by Interior Secretary Manuel Lujan in an effort to save the battlefields for future generations.

His claim that these sites "are essential in conveying to citizens of every age how our ancestors fought for our closest held ideals" makes sense.

Lujan plans to seek \$15 million in federal "seed money" but hopes for state and private help as well, because the federal government lacks the money to buy all of the sites.

The plan was announced at the Manassas National Battlefield Park in Virginia on the 129th observance of the First Battle of Bull Run. The park's pastures, woodlands and split rail fences are essentially unchanged since the 1860s when Union troops suffered two bloody defeats there.

More recently, in 1988, developers and preservationists fought a new battle there. The result was congressional action expanding the park's boundaries to stop a shopping mall from being built on adjacent, historically significant land.

The cost for the disputed property was immense — \$100 million — undermining the need for private help. The new federal program will encourage such help, similar to the recent gift of 100,000 acres from the Richard King Mellon Foundation.

That land included The Cornfield in Maryland where part of the Battle of Antietam was fought on Sept. 17, 1862. This was the bloodiest day of the Civil War, when more than 23,000 Union and Confederate soldiers were killed or wounded.

The Cornfield is typical of the battle sites that have thus far remained protected but increasingly are threatened by incompatible adjacent development.

Lujan's plan is needed to help preserve our heritage by keeping shopping malls and parking lots out of the places where so many Americans died in blue or gray uniforms.